

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2023

Remarks Commemorating the 20th Anniversary of the Department of Homeland Security

March 1, 2023

How are you, fellas? Please. Thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you. You're very nice. Thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you. Please. Please, sit.

I don't know who Ali was talking about, someone being around that long. *[Laughter]*

Twenty years. Whoa. You know, when we voted to set you all up, no one ever thought it'd be over 260,000 people. No one thought it would take up to—but you've done an incredible job.

Mr. Secretary, I came for a simple reason: to say thank you. Thank you for welcoming me back here today. As well as 20 years.

Mr. Secretary, you're a true patriot who has dedicated your career to protecting and serving the American people while upholding our Nation's laws and standing up for American values. Because when I think of this department, I think of it in that way: standing up for American values.

I'm so grateful for everything, Mr. Secretary, you've done and all of you do for our country and for the whole world.

You know, every 9/11, I think about a friend of mine named Davis Sezna, from Delaware. The year before 9/11, I was watching television in my—it was in the summer. And I was watching television in my recreation room, looking at my grandkids in the swimming pool. And all of a sudden, they broke in, and they showed someone sitting on the banks of the Delaware and Chesapeake Canal—or the C&D Canal—Chesapeake and Delaware Canal.

And he had his head in his—his head in his hands. And they said that he had just lost his youngest son. Because the—what happened was the boat—the small boat they had hit a piling that was just below the water. The child was down in the hull, down by the hull. And anyway, he died.

And he picked up the phone, and he was dialing the phone. And as I watched him dial the phone, my phone rang. He was calling me to tell me what had just happened and asked what he should do.

Then, a year later, I was with him on 9/11. Not with him—I was near him, on 9/11, when he got a phone call. His oldest son was just 6 days into a job on the 104th floor of the South Tower at the World Trade Center. And Davis went straight to Ground Zero in search of his son and searched deep into the last, as he called it, "innings of hope," as he put it.

And a few days later, after they finally found that his son was there and had died, I got a call from Davis. And we talked as fathers. I had lost several kids earlier. Long story. But we were talking as dads, and I didn't understand—I didn't have the loss he had, but I did lose a wife and a child and—in an accident.

And it was—I was on my way, when he called, to speak to students at the University of Delaware to talk about 9/11—and there were several thousand students—to try to set the record—not straight, but to calm things down a little bit and to make some sense out of the new world we were in.

And I told him where I was going. And he said over the phone—he said: "Just tell them. Just tell them"—I'll never forget what he said—"Don't be afraid." He said: "Don't be afraid. Tell them that." It's extraordinary yet the most ordinary of American things, "Don't be afraid"—to know that life can be unfair and uncertain, a cruel twist of an accident or deliberate act of evil.

But even in the darkness, there still should be light. Don't be afraid. Fight back, not let the terrorists define us or fundamentally change our way of life, but to stand up—to stand up—to fear and to make sure that Americans can still live their lives and dream their dreams.

That's what all of you represent, from my perspective: letting Americans live their lives and still dream their dreams. The Department of Homeland Security was formed out of the tragedy of 9/11 to be—to repeat myself, but with an unshakeable resolve of a sacred mission to secure our country and to protect the American people.

Today, the work of DHS is as important—as important as it's ever been. I would argue it's even more important than it's been up to now.

And the fact is, you have 260,000 employees, including 20 percent of you who are veterans, continuing to serve your nation, preventing terror attacks domestically and globally; protecting our air, our land, our maritime borders; helping the global partners that we have do the same thing; responding in an instant to natural disasters.

We've flown all over the country with the head of FEMA. We've been to more States than we like to acknowledge now, with the fire, drought, and devastation. With the climate crisis, we're asking more of you every single day with extreme weather impacting communities and mounting frequency and ferocity.

All the while helping our people cope with public emergencies like the collapsed condo in Florida, which no one had ever anticipated; growing greater resilience in our communities through violence prevention programs.

And by the way, I see your incredible work every single day with the brave women and men of the United States Secret Service vigilantly protecting my family, the Vice President's family, former Presidents, visiting world leaders, and events of national consequence.

Every day, the people of this department are also working to preserve the integrity of our elections, protect our critical infrastructure from physical and cyber attack. I'm going to keep making sure you have the resources you need to do the job, because your job is so expansive across the board.

In fact, I was able to secure record funding for DHS, and I'm asking Congress to do more. In the 20 years since DHS began, the world has become more interconnected, more complicated than ever, and new threats are emerging with the incredible advances in technology. Some are frightening, those advances. Many are reassuring.

But yet, because of you, America is safer, it's stronger, and it's better prepared to meet whatever threat we face. And the threats are mounting; they're not diminishing. But we have you.

And I know the stakes and the stress of the job take an incredible toll, yet every single one of you answer the call every day.

It's not hyperbole to suggest you're heroes. You're patriots who possess a rare commitment—a rare commitment—to your fellow Americans, showing the American people how their Government works for them. You give them confidence.

You represent the best of us: duty, devotion, courage, honor, service before self. It's truly noble. While I'm speaking to you, the leaders here, there are so many people out in the field putting their lives at risk as I speak to you.

As we commemorate 20 years of this remarkable department and all its key elements, so many I can't mention all of them in one moment: the Coast Guard, Secret Service, FEMA, the Transportation Security Administration, Customs and Border Patrol, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, and the Federal [Law; White House correction] Enforcement Training Center.

On behalf of the American people—and I mean this—on behalf of the America people, I came for a simple reason, as I said: to say thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you. The American people know you're there, but they have no idea just how many of you there are, how many people put their lives on the line every day for them. And we owe you.

You know, on this day, we also honor those who gave the full devotion of their—to their nation in serving in this department. We remember them. We've got to remember them all. It matters. Because unlike in other engagements, many of them don't get to be known, don't get to be celebrated.

We also know this is not just the person who works the job who serves. It's the whole family. And that's the part I think that we sometimes underestimate.

You know, there's a line from the English poet, John Milton, who I've quoted before. He said, "They also serve who only stand and wait." "They also serve who only stand and wait."

We owe your families so damn much—so damn much. They have a sense of what you're doing. They know some of it in detail, the chances you're taking. But every day, every time you walk out of that house and that door closes behind you, they wonder, and they serve.

So I thank the families who had to stand and wait so that—hoping their loved ones will come home just as they left the door. They serve as well.

I think maybe that's the hardest part for most of you, is knowing what your families are facing. There's no greater responsibility for Government than ensuring the safety of the American people and those who serve and protect us all.

On behalf of the American people, I want to thank you. And I mean it from the bottom of my heart: Thank you for your service. Thank you, thank you, thank you. I know it's a small thing, but it—we mean it. And I don't think they get to see your faces, get to know who you are, have any idea all the risks so many of you take. And it's important they know.

So God bless the patriots of the Department of Homeland Security, and may God keep all of the folks you have in the field safe and secure. Because we need them. We need them badly.

Again, thank you, thank you, thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:30 p.m. at Department of Homeland Security Headquarters. In his remarks, he referred to Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro N. Mayorkas, who introduced the President; and Federal Emergency Management Agency Administrator Deanne Bennett Criswell.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Department of Homeland Security, 20th anniversary commemoration.

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Training Center; Natural disasters, climate change impacts; Secretary of Homeland Security; September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks; Transportation Security Administration; U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services; U.S. Coast Guard; U.S. Customs and Border Protection; U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement; U.S. Secret Service; Veterans, service and dedication.

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